

Escape from the Frontier: Lincoln's Peculiar Relationship with Indiana

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by
Mark E. Neely, Jr.

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It is our duty to show the world the Majesty and beauty of his character, as it grew by itself and unassisted, out of this unpromising soil. We must point mankind to the diamond glowing on the dunghill....

Chauncey Black to Ward Hill Lamon

Chauncey Black, ghost-writer for Abraham Lincoln's friend and sometime bodyguard Ward Hill Lamon, used pungent language to make his point, but most early biographers of Lincoln agreed with him. Lincoln was a great man, they thought, and his greatness was a triumph over the crudities and barbarism of the frontier environment of his youth—the greater part of which he spent in Indiana.

Pious New Englanders like Josiah G. Holland, who wrote the first substantial biography of Lincoln after his assassination, had always regarded the sixteenth President as somewhat uncouth, a child of nature with a great heart but terrible manners. Holland was a Massachusetts journalist with a moralistic bent. The publishing house of Gurdon Bill recognized a market (to this day unexhausted by more than a hundred years of historical writing and more than six thousand works on Lincoln) and commissioned the facile Holland to write a biography—in a hurry. He read the available campaign biographies and published

documents on Lincoln's Presidency, then rushed out to Springfield on a lightning research trip. What he saw and heard there—from Lincoln's old law partner William Henry Herndon and the associates to whom Herndon introduced him—did nothing to change his mind about the West. In depicting Indiana, Holland's *Life of Abraham Lincoln* (1866) dwelled upon "the extreme humility of border life...and the paucity of its stimulants to mental growth and social development."

Westerners who had grown up on the frontier with Lincoln had no illusions about the environment. If anything, they exaggerated the hardships and crudities of their early surroundings. This tradition of tall tales was almost as old as the frontier itself. Ward Hill Lamon, through his ghost-writer, did not stop at the customary descriptions of the hazards of frontier life. He burdened Lincoln with the additional handicaps of possible illegitimate birth and a father who was "idle, thriftless, poor, a hunter, and a rover." The marriage of Thomas Lincoln and Nancy Hanks, Abraham's father and mother, he said (erroneously), existed only by "mutual acknowledgement and cohabitation." William Herndon spiced his treatment of Lincoln's early years with examples of frontier cruelty. While in Indiana, Herndon wrote, Lincoln once sewed a little yellow dog into a coonskin, with the unfortunate result that other dogs attacked and killed it. Rising from the "stagnant, putrid pool" of his youth, Lincoln overcame "the terrible environment that surrounded him."

As America neared the end of the Nineteenth Century, the frontier closed, and Americans began to feel that they were losing something that, despite its roughness, had been essential in forming the national character. Once the wilderness was conquered, more and more Americans looked back nostalgically at what they had lost. This mood was bound to affect the way historians and biographers regarded the role of Lincoln's Indiana youth in shaping his character.

The writer who turned interpretations of the Indiana years around seemed a very unlikely prospect to do so—a woman, six feet tall, who was a college graduate and had studied in Paris. Ida Tarbell was offended by the "half-pitying, half-

contemptuous attitude toward Abraham Lincoln's early life?" Sure, there was poverty, she said, but there were also the "delights and interests the country offers a child." "The horse, the dog, the ox, the chin fly, the plow, the hog," she wrote in primitive admiration, "these companions of his youth became interpreters of his meaning, solvers of his problems in his great necessity, of making men understand and follow him." Miss Tarbell was an important influence on Carl Sandburg, and through him is perpetuated in the modern popular mind the view of Lincoln as a man shaped critically by his environment for his later greatness. Sandburg wrote lyrically: "In the short and simple annals of the poor, it seems there are people who breathe with the earth and take into their lungs and blood some of the hard and dark strength of its mystery. During six and seven months each year in the twelve fiercest formative years of his life, Abraham Lincoln had the pads of his foot-soles bare against the clay of the earth. It may be the earth told him in her own tough gypsy slang one or two knacks of living worth keeping." Hal Holbrook's portrayal of "Sandburg's Lincoln" on television—complete with a southern Indiana accent carefully studied in the region—has brought Miss Tarbell's and Sandburg's child of nature to millions of Americans.

Benjamin Thomas, a modern Lincoln biographer, aptly called the earlier view the "dunghill" thesis. The alternate view might be called the "chin fly" thesis. Which is right? The factual record is spare but rather well known and substantially agreed upon by modern Lincoln students.

Abraham Lincoln came to Indiana with his parents in 1816, the year it became a state. He was seven years old. Thomas Lincoln brought his family north, as Abraham recalled many years later, "chiefly on account of the difficulty in land titles in K[entucky]," where Abraham had been born in 1809. The chaotic land laws of the Bluegrass State made it a crazy quilt of conflicting and overlapping land claims. Thomas had purchased three farms there, all proved to have defective titles, and he lost land or money in each of the deals. Disenchanted, he moved to Indiana, laid off in a neat grid by federal surveys under the

Land Ordinance of 1785. Besides, slavery was illegal in Indiana, and Thomas, a dissenting Baptist, apparently disliked Kentucky's labor system.

Though young, Abraham was large for his age and "had an axe put into his hands at once." He used it thereafter, except at plowing and harvesting seasons, for most of his fourteen years in the Hoosier State. Two years after the family moved from Kentucky, Lincoln's mother died of "milk sickness," a fatal disease contracted from the milk of cows that had grazed on poisonous white snakeroot. A year later, when Abraham was ten, a horse kicked him and rendered him unconscious long enough for some to fear he had been killed. In the same year Thomas remarried, choosing a Kentucky widow named Sarah Bush Johnston. She proved, in Abraham's estimation, "good and kind," and he always called her "Mother." Lincoln's older sister Sarah married in Indiana and died there in childbirth in 1828. Abraham attended school under three Hoosier schoolmasters who he immortalized in an autobiographical sketch in 1860 just by recalling their names: Andrew Crawford, James Swaney, and Azel W. Dorsey. He attended their schools less than a year altogether—"by littles," Lincoln put it, probably between harvesting and planting. In 1830 he left the state for Illinois. Abraham was twenty-one years old and would soon leave home to make his own way in the world.

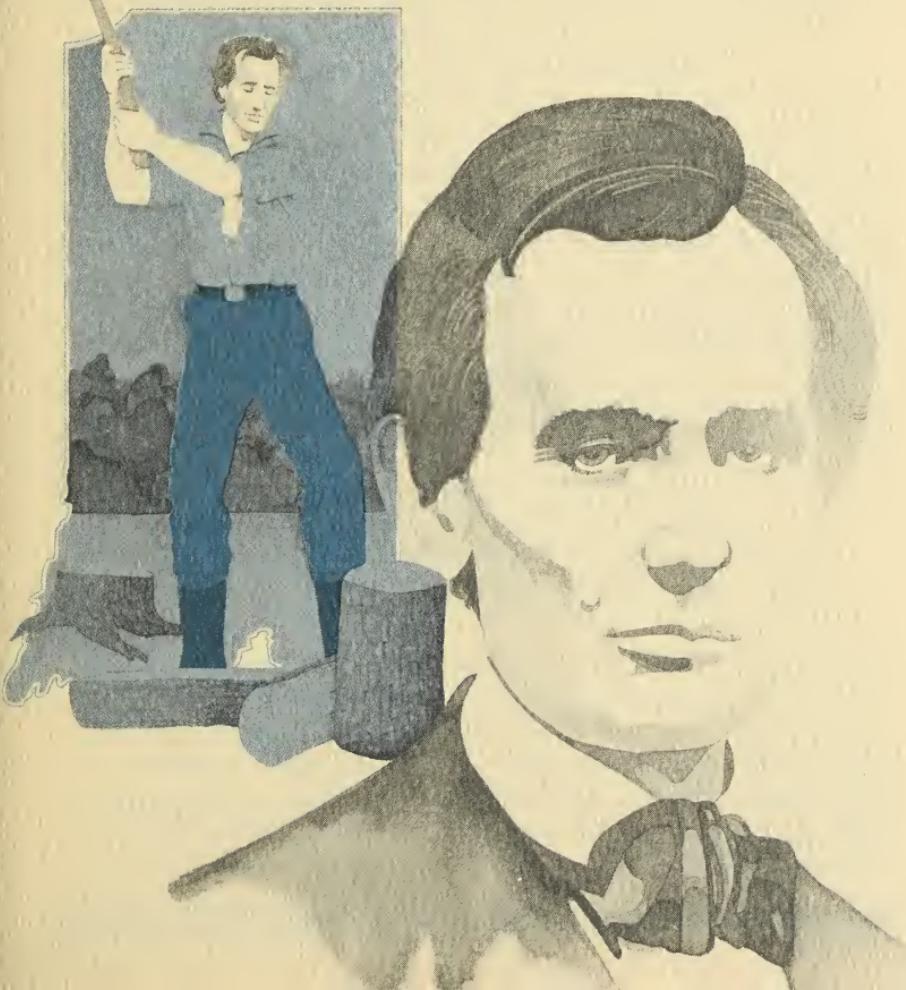
Did Lincoln remember the delights of an outdoor life with such companions as the chin fly, or was he happy to leave the Hoosier "dunghill"? On the whole—and this is the major problem with the "chin fly" thesis—he seems to have sided with the "dunghill" view of the state.

When Lincoln reflected on his youth in later years, he found it difficult to do so with unmixed nostalgia. If one reads carefully what he said about his Hoosier schoolmasters, for example, their immortality seems ironic. "There was absolutely nothing to excite ambition for education," Lincoln remembered. It was an age when any decent education was founded on classical learning, but in Indiana, Lincoln said, "If a straggler supposed to understand Latin, happened to sojourn in the neighborhood,

he was looked upon as a wizzard." Dorsey, Swaney, and Crawford ran "schools, so called," but "no qualification was ever required of a teacher, beyond 'readin, writin, and cipherin.'" The natural result, Lincoln explained, was that "when I came of age I did not know much." In a forty-seven-word outline of his life written for *The Dictionary of Congress* in 1858, Lincoln described his education in one word, "defective."

As for Miss Tarbell's chin fly and other country delights, Lincoln remembered them as somewhat less than delightful.

Indiana had been "a wild region, with many bears and other wild animals still in the woods." It was "an unbroken



wilderness," and, Lincoln recalled, he "fought until he reached his twentieth year" with "the trees and logs and grubs." "That part of the country" was "as unpoetical as any spot of the earth."

Lincoln nevertheless did write poetry about Indiana. Two years after returning to the state in 1844 to campaign for Whig Presidential candidate Henry Clay, Lincoln composed two poems about his "childhood-home." One described a bear hunt and evoked some of the humor and boisterousness of frontier life when the customarily quiet and solitary forest was suddenly "alive with fun," and a "merry *corps*" of hunters put the "woods ...in a roar" with a wild and rollicking bear chase.

The other poem began sentimentally:

My childhood-home I see again,
And gladden with the view;
And still as mem'ries crowd my brain,
There's sadness in it too.

Lincoln referred also "To woods, and fields, and scenes of play/ And school-mates loved so well," but dwelt for the most part on Matthew Gentry, a "fortune-favored child" three years older than Abraham. As a sixteen-year-old boy, Lincoln had seen Matthew go berserk before his very eyes. The poem described Matthew's madness at great length. He maimed himself. He attacked his mother and father. He shrieked, begged, swore, wept, prayed, laughed, and howled maniacally. Lincoln ended his poem this way:

O death! Thou awe-inspiring prince,
That keepst the world in fear;
Why dost thou tear more blest ones hence,
And leave him ling'ring here?

There is little cause for wonder that Indiana reminded Lincoln of death. His mother died there. His sister died there. And he had his own brush with death when kicked by a horse.

Holland, Lamon, and Herndon came nearer to capturing the spirit of Lincoln's Indiana years, as Lincoln himself remembered them, than did Miss Tarbell, Sandburg, and Holbrook. But those years are not to be dismissed merely as an unhappy prelude to greatness. They hold a key to understanding

Lincoln's early political career.

Historians have long been puzzled over why Lincoln became a Whig. What, they ask, did this log-cabin democrat have in common with the party widely regarded as the party of bankers and businessmen, of the rich and well-born? Lincoln became a Whig for a very good reason: that party offered a program to change the West, to improve the defects of the environment of Lincoln's youth.

Soon after leaving Indiana, Lincoln was learning the rudiments of Henry Clay's "American System." This Whig dream advocated protective tariffs to nurture infant manufacturing concerns; government aid to build canals, railroads, and turnpikes; and centralized banking to provide a plentiful money supply for enlarged commercial transactions. Lincoln worked for this program for the life of the Whig party. Banks, railroads, turnpikes, manufacturing—Lincoln and his fellow Whigs had essentially a developer's dream. There was not a pastoral bone in Lincoln's body. When he left the log cabin, he never looked back. He settled eventually in a city, became a lawyer, married a woman who had been to finishing school and could read French, and sent his son to Exeter Academy and Harvard. Farming as a way of life had no charms for this farmer's son. Lincoln thought of agriculture simply as the sector of the American economy that had benefitted least from technological innovations. He dreamed of a steam-plow. If he ever stared moodily at the Sangamon River, as modern motion pictures sometimes portray him, he was probably thinking of turning it into a barge canal.

Just two years after Lincoln left Indiana, he published his first political platform. The two major subjects were internal improvements and education:

Time and experience have verified to a demonstration, the public utility of internal improvements. That the poorest and most thinly populated countries would be greatly benefitted by the opening of good roads, and in the clearing of navigable streams within their limits, is what no person will deny....With respect to the county of Sangamo, some more easy means of communication than we now possess, for the purpose of facil-

tating the task of exporting the surplus products of its fertile soil, and importing necessary articles from abroad, are indispensably necessary....I believe the improvement of the Sangamo river, to be vastly important and highly desirable to the people of this county; and if elected, any measure...having this for its object, which may appear judicious,...shall receive my support. ...Upon the subject of education, not presuming to dictate any plan or system respecting it, I can only say that I view it as the most important subject which we as a people can be engaged in. That every man may receive at least, a moderate education, and thereby be enabled to read the histories of his own and other countries, by which he may duly appreciate the value of our free institutions, appears to be an object of vital importance, even on this account alone, to say nothing of the advantages and satisfaction to be derived from all being able to read the scriptures and other works, both of a religious and moral nature, for themselves. For my part, I desire to see the time when education, and by its means, morality, sobriety, enterprise and industry, shall become much more general than at present, and should be gratified to have it in my power to contribute something to the advancement of any measure which might have a tendency to accelerate the happy period.

Lincoln's first political platform was an attempt to remedy the faults of his Indiana experience—too much wilderness, too little education.

When Lincoln returned to Indiana in 1859 to make a political speech, a newspaper reporter, paraphrasing the visitor, wrote:

The scenes he passed through today are wonderfully different from the first scenes he witnessed in the State of Indiana, where he was raised, in Spencer county, on the Ohio river. There was an unbroken wilderness there then, and an axe was put in his hand; and with the trees and logs and grubs he fought until he reached his twentieth year.

The new Midwest, urban and industrial, would surely be more to Abraham Lincoln's liking than the old.

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